

Childhood Bullying: Awareness, Interventions, and a Model for Change

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The topic of bullying has been the focus of recent news headlines and local legislation. Repetitive verbal and/or physical abuse from bullies can wreak havoc on its victims and carries consequences for bullies as well. In this Issue Brief we review the prevalence of bullying, identify bullying and the signs of a bully, and discuss innovative strategies for addressing the challenges of bullying.

What is Bullying

Bullying involves repeated and deliberate verbal and/or physical harassment, as well as social exclusion over time toward another who has difficulty defending him or herself from a person or group of people perceived to be stronger or dominant.¹⁻⁴ The Commonwealth of Massachusetts defines bullying as “the repeated use by one or more students [aggressor(s)] of a written, verbal or electronic expression or a physical act or gesture or any combination thereof, directed at a target that: (i) causes physical or emotional harm to the target or damage to the target’s property; (ii) places the target in reasonable fear of harm to him/herself or of damage to his/her property; (iii) creates a hostile environment at school for the target; (iv) infringes on the rights of the target at school; or (v) materially and substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school.”⁵ Bullies tend to choose peers who are easily intimidated. Bullying by girls tends to be verbal and usually targets another girl, whereas bullying by boys tends to be physical intimidation or threats, regardless of the gender of their victim.^{1, 3-4}



Prevalence of Bullying

Recent studies show that in the United States 30 percent of 6th to 10th graders were bullies, a target of bullying, or both.¹⁻² On any given day as many as 160,000 students nationwide may stay home because they are afraid of being bullied.⁶ Victims of bullying can develop low self-esteem, depression and anxiety that may subsequently interfere with their social and emotional development, as well as their academic performance.⁷⁻⁸ Some may also develop suicidal thoughts.⁷ In Massachusetts there have been two reports of completed suicide in which the victims were chronically bullied and no longer able to deal with the harassing behavior from their peers. Bullying has long-term consequences. Research shows that bullies are at a higher risk of dropping out of school, getting into fights, vandalizing, shoplifting, and substance use.^{6-7, 9} If there is no intervention they are also four to six times more likely than their non-bullying peers to have at least one criminal conviction by age 24.^{2, 6, 10}

Cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon where bullies use electronic means such as e-mail, texting and social

networking sites to send mean or threatening messages or images to or about someone. Oftentimes disparaging information is sent anonymously, or bullies pretend to be someone else.^{1,6,11} What makes cyberbullying especially dangerous is the speed at which the information is propagated with a few simple clicks of a mouse. In some ways cyberbullying can be more damaging because embarrassing or disparaging information can be sent well beyond the victim's school, town, or even state, to virtually anyone around the globe.

Identifying Bullying

It is important to recognize signs that a youth may be the victim of bullying. Some common signs are withdrawal and apprehension about going to school, riding the school bus, or taking part in organized activities with peers.^{6,12} Youth may also develop physical symptoms such as headaches, abdominal pain, poor appetite, sleep disturbance, and cold-like symptoms.^{7-8,12}

Parents, teachers, and physicians should also look for signs that a youth might be a bully. If the youth gets into frequent fights or destroys, steals, or vandalizes property, these might be the signs of a bully.⁴

What Can be Done

Teachers, parents, and the community at large can teach youth what they should do if they witness a peer being bullied.⁴ Youth should be taught that it is not okay to be a bystander or an instigator and not to encourage the bully in any way. Witnesses should be taught to report the bully to a supervising adult. In cases of cyberbullying youth should be instructed not to respond to any posted messages and to report the incident to their parents or teachers.

It is important to let victims of bullying know that it is not their fault. Victims can be empowered by teaching them to take an assertive stance to bullies, such as ignoring them and walking away and seeking help from a teacher or staff member at their school. Explain to them that the true goal of the bully is to get a response and it is best that the bully get a consequential response from an authoritative figure at the school rather than the satisfaction of seeing his/her victims continue to suffer and feel helpless. If it is

clear a youth is bullying others, a referral to a mental health professional for a comprehensive evaluation may help to explain what is causing the bullying and to develop a plan to address the destructive behavior. Often bullies are not even aware of the extent to which they are inflicting physical and emotional trauma.¹³

Bullying Prevention

The response to bullying behavior can be seen in both the development of novel interventions and legislative agendas to impede bullying. One model intervention, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (BPP) from Norway, reduced bullying incidents by nearly 50 percent.¹⁴ The program, which aims to change the social norms that promote passive acceptance of bullying behavior, has been adapted and implemented in a number of countries.¹⁵ Pilot studies of the Olweus BPP implemented in the United States have demonstrated effectiveness, showing a decrease in bullying incidents by 20 - 45 percent.^{3,16-17} The most robust decreases were noted in the presence of strong parent/family and community involvement, similar to findings from the Norway BPP.

In 2010 Massachusetts passed one of the country's strictest anti-bullying laws, An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools. The law required all school districts to implement bullying prevention programs within one year.¹⁸

Bullying Prevention Resources

To learn more about bullying and bullying prevention:

<http://www.stopbullying.gov/index.html>¹⁹

For school districts interested in developing their own Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plans:

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/bullying/>²⁰ &
<http://www.cfchildren.org/steps-to-respect.aspx>²¹

For researchers: The CDC has compiled a compendium of measures for assessing bullying experiences:

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullycompendium-a.pdf>²²

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